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ABSTRACT

Career options for baccalaureate level psychology graduates are not readily known. Deciding whether to pursue a university career or one in industry is often a difficult decision for graduates since they usually have limited industrial experience. This paper describes how graduates can maximize the value of their psychology degree. It explains what working in industry would be like for a graduate, what skills they would utilize, and which factors would lead to their success in industry. Practical recommendations are listed for working in both educational settings and in industry. Tips on writing a resume and preparing for an interview are also included. (JDM)

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Preparing for Your Career with a Psychology Degree

by

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Preparing For Your Career With A Psychology Degree

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Abstract

Career options for baccalaureate level psychology graduates are not necessarily obvious. Deciding whether to pursue a university career or one in industry is often difficult for graduate students because they have limited industrial experience. This paper provides initial career guidance for undergraduate students; an introduction to working in industry for graduate and undergraduate students; and practical recommendations for securing a job in K to 12 teaching and in industry.

Introduction

Psychology is a very popular undergraduate major. In psychology, unlike engineering, career options for the baccalaureate level graduate are not necessarily obvious. Thus, the first section of this paper is designed to provide initial guidance on career options for the individual with an undergraduate psychology degree.

Before deciding to work in industry students need to know what the work will be like and what skills they will use. This preview is especially important for Graduate Students who face a difficult decision: Should they pursue a career in academics or one in industry? Many students have extensive experience in academic settings, but very limited experience with industry. Thus, the second section of this paper is designed to provide an introduction to working in industry.

The third section of this paper provides practical recommendations for securing a job in K to 12 teaching and in industry.

About the Authors

Ronald G. Shapiro, Ph.D. is the Program Manager for Skills for IBM Software. Ron received his B.A. from the University of Rochester and his M.A. and Ph.D. from Ohio State University in Experimental Psychology. Ron has worked as a human factors practitioner in both the large company (IBM) and small consulting firm environments. He has managed human factors departments and has served as the corporate coordinator of Human Factors and Usability at IBM. Ron has taught psychology at the university level and presents regularly at professional psychologists' and educators' conferences. Additionally, he presents to various college student groups (including HFES Student Chapters) often on career preparation. He is an experienced recruiter, has authored several articles on recruiting, and chairs the careers panel at the Human Factors and Ergonomics Society Annual Meeting. Ron has also compiled a guide for job candidates which is distributed by the Human Factors and Ergonomics Society.

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Career Options With An Undergraduate Psychology Degree

What Are Your "Career Options?"

- Popular options
  - "Helping Professions"
    - Improve lives of people with "mental health" problems
      - Diagnosis
      - Treatment
    - Help "typical" people with stressful situations
      - Individual/Family/marriage counseling
      - Career/educational counseling
  - A dose of reality:
    - Bachelor's level jobs in these fields are often low paying and offer little to no career growth
    - Jobs in these fields with growth potential require a minimum of a masters degree, often a Ph.D.
    - Managed health care:
      - Reducing freedom to make independent decisions
      - Reducing income
      - Making required internships very difficult to get

What Are Your "Career Options?"

(continued)

- Popular options (continued)
  - Education (primary, elementary, or secondary school level)
    - Teacher
      - Classroom
      - Subject Matter Specialist
      - Interventionist
      - Speech and Language
      - Multimedia
      - Exceptional Children
    - Guidance Counselor
    - School Administrator
    - School Psychologist/Learning Diagnostician

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What Are Your "Career Options?"

(continued)

- Popular options (continued)
  - Education (primary, elementary, or secondary school level) (continued)
    - Abilities, Skills and Talents
      - Analytic ability
      - Observation and interpretation
      - Patient, confident and supportive
      - Understand
        - ✓ Education, child development, personality, cognition
        - ✓ Learning disabilities, parenting concerns
      - Oral and written communications
      - Sell evaluations and evaluation results

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What Are Your "Career Options?"

(continued)

- Popular options (continued)
  - Education (primary, elementary, or secondary school level) (continued)
    - A dose of reality:
      - Teaching at primary, elementary, secondary levels:
        - ✓ Bachelor's level jobs in teaching requires education certification and normally a master's degree to maintain certification
        - ✓ Interventionist, subject matter specialist, administration usually require additional certification

          Most secondary school psychology teachers need to be certified to teach social studies!!!
        - ✓ Teaching jobs pay moderate salaries
        - ✓ Added pressures of dealing with non educational issues such as discipline
        - ✓ Positions may be difficult to get in some parts of the USA
        - ✓ Substitute teaching in the school district where you are applying for your permanent job may improve your ranking among job candidates
        - ✓ Opportunity to really "make a difference" and help students

What Are Your "Career Options?"

(continued)

- Popular options (continued)
  - Education (primary, elementary, or secondary school level) (continued)
    - A dose of reality (continued):
      - School psychologist:
        - ✓ Entry level degree typically is a Master's degree plus certification
        - ✓ Individual evaluation a major part of the job
        - ✓ Typically an itinerant
        - ✓ Case load sometimes overwhelming
        - ✓ Must be able to SELL!
        - ✓ Opportunity to really "make a difference" and help students

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What Are Your "Career Options?"

(continued)

- Popular options (continued)
  - Education (primary, elementary, or secondary school level) (continued)
    - A dose of reality (continued):
      - Guidance counselor
        - ✓ May have multiple schools, each may have full time demand
        - ✓ Most job at secondary school level
        - ✓ Time Management:
          - * Timely completion of transcripts and recommendations are a key priority
          - * You really want to counsel, but there are only so many hours in the day
          - * Behavioral issues (an offshoot of school disciplinarian) are a priority
        - ✓ Opportunity to really "make a difference" and help students

What Are Your "Career Options?"

(continued)

- Popular options (continued)
  - Education:
    - Research/Teaching at the college level
  - A dose of reality:
    - College research/teaching:
      - Positions difficult to come by
      - Salaries moderate to low
      - Publish or perish...
        - ✓ Tenure difficult to get...
        - ✓ If tenure denied, after 6 years of work, must start over
      - Often requires one or more Postdoctoral fellowships in addition to Ph.D.
      - Numerous positions are one to five year contracts, which may or may not be renewable.

What Are Your "Career Options?"

(continued)

- Industrial Options Directly Related To Psychology
  - Industrial and Organizational Psychology
    - Leadership
    - Assessment
    - Recruitment
    - Designing organizations
  - Human Factors
    - Designing and evaluating solutions for people
      - Products for consumers
      - Systems for industry and government
    - Emerging job titles:
      - Usability engineer, Information architect, User experience designer, Ergonomist
    - Allied professions: Product Safety, Industrial Safety
  - Marketing
    - Preparing information and planning presentation techniques for potential customers

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What Are Your "Career Options?"

(continued)

- Industrial Options Directly Related To Psychology (continued)
  - A dose of reality:
    - Salaries are high and increasing
    - Demand is very high and increasing
    - Internships for qualified candidates are relatively easy to find
    - Masters or Ph.D. degree is often, but not always, required
    - Excellent career growth potential
    - Psychology teaches about people. Must also:
      - Know the domain/system/business in which you will work
      - Have specific skills and tools
    - Work requires a very significant amount of time
    - Must work hard to achieve appropriate "work/life balance"
    - If you plan and execute plan well your future may be very bright
    - If you do not plan well, you may waste a great deal of effort

What Are Your "Career Options?"

(continued)

- Other Industrial Options Not Directly Related To Psychology:
  - Business Management
  - Human Resources
  - Sales
  - Customer Relations
- A dose of reality:
  - In all of the above professions, it is possible to receive an undergraduate degree specializing in the profession
  - For optimal job selection you need to be able to show you understand the business and the tool set required as well as people who have majored in these areas in college
  - Most of these professions do not require a graduate degree

What Are Your "Career Options?"

(continued)

- Career Directions Not Directly Related To Psychology:
  - Project Management
  - Systems Engineering
  - Software Development
- A dose of reality:
  - These jobs are not typically entry level jobs for psychology majors, unless they have a dual major
  - Psychology majors may gather job experiences and additional education (perhaps a certification program or a masters degree) which prepares them to move into these professions
  - While psychology majors have been very successful in these areas, the career path for moving into these areas is not always obvious, so initiative in seeking out opportunities is required

What Skills Will You Utilize? (continued)

Potential

- You will utilize the following skills and talents:
  - Product design
  - Work on several problems at once
  - "See the big picture"
- If you have an advanced degree you may be expected to:
  - Become a recognized leader and expert in your field
  - Provide technical planning and strategic direction

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How Does Your Psychology Degree Help You?

- Understand people
  - You will understand people better as a result of studying psychology
  - This will make you a better employee in virtually any career
- Valuable tools
  - If (and only if) you maximize the value of your degree, you will develop a fantastic tool set that will help you on the job with:
    - Analyzing virtually any problem
    - Decision making
    - Evaluating data
    - Planning most any program or project
    - Thinking broadly and focusing in on the right issues
    - Asking the right questions
  - The psychology degree provides a fantastic opportunity to acquire these skills, but many people do not! Don't miss the boat!

How Do You Maximize The Value Of Your Undergraduate Psychology Degree?

- Become totally involved with your department at school!
- Involvement in research projects:
  - From your first (or at latest your second) year become involved in faculty research
  - Goal is to be published (or in press) as an author (or at least with name in acknowledgments) before graduation
  - It's best if this work has practical implications
- Most of your classes should be small intensive seminars
- Complete your research methods classes as soon as possible
  - If statistics is not covered extensively take statistics classes
- Build a list of "recommenders" from the faculty you are supporting
- The ways to minimize the value of your degree:
  - Take mostly large classes
  - Graduate without knowing the faculty
  - Take research methods class your senior year
  - To graduate with some knowledge, but no tools!

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What Do You Need To Do?

- Remember, to be an ideal job candidate you need to:
  - Understand People
    - Your psychology degree is extremely valuable here
  - Know the field in which you will be working
    - If it's aviation, become a pilot
    - If it's computers, study computer science, programming, and/or software engineering
    - If it's consumer electronics, study some engineering
  - Specific skills or tool kits
    - The tools from your psychology program
    - Programming
    - Business
    - For the business in which you want to work
- So, you need to consider:
  - Dual major
  - Minor
  - Heavy concentration in your area of interest outside of psychology

What Do You Need To Do?

(continued)

- Outside of your department:
  - Do an industrial internship
  - Campus involvement
  - Volunteer work
  - Become active in professional organizations
  - Build a resume now, identify gaps, and work to fill them
  - Practice interviewing
- Decide on plans for Graduate School:
  - Decide on Master's or Ph.D. degree program
  - If not going to graduate school, focus on jobs available now
    - Be sure your program will provide you with the skills you need!
    - If not, make adjustments
    - Technical skills are vital to getting high growth potential jobs if you start working full time without a graduate degree!
    - Develop a marketing plan to show how your technical and psychology skills combine to make you the best job candidate!

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What Is It Like Working In Industry With A Psychology Degree

What Would You Do in Industry?

- Help your employer achieve their goals:
  - To make a profit
  - To save money
  - To gain market share
  - To develop high quality products and services
  - To achieve a high level of customer satisfaction
  - To prevent accidents and litigation
- Help customers achieve their goals:
  - Figure out what customers need
  - Design products, systems, and programs to meet those needs
  - Convince others to implement the designs
  - Measure how well customers' needs are met
- Help product designers achieve their goals:
  - Prototype designs
  - Validate designs via testing, observation, customer reaction
  - Work with marketing to best feature those designs

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What Would You Do In Industry? (continued)

- Interact with:
  - Management
  - Colleagues
  - Customers
  - Suppliers
  - Other professionals
- Represent company to customers and suppliers
- Work on multidisciplinary teams, lead where required
- Advise and consult to solve team members' problems
- Maintain and enhance your professional skills
- Be ready to explain your profession at the "drop of a hat"
- Teach occasional classes in your area of expertise

What Skills Will You Utilize?

Technical Skills

- A psychology graduate should be equipped to utilize the following skills:
  - Analysis of situations with experiments, observations, or interviews
  - Interpretation of qualitative as well as quantitative data
  - Translation of information into meaningful recommendations
  - Demonstrated problem solving and assessment skills
  - Thinking at a conceptual as well as a practical level
  - Solving general problems and focusing on details
- You should also offer the following:
  - Knowledge about your industry
    - Speak the language of your team and company
    - For computer software, you can prototype and program
    - For aviation, you can fly
  - An interest in a variety of practical problems of interest to the industry rather than one single theory
  - Acquired the skills industry needs, even if you had to do self-study or go outside your program to do so

What Skills Will You Utilize? (continued)

General Skills

- You will utilize the following skills, talents and attributes which you developed through undergraduate campus leadership (and graduate research and teaching):
  - Action orientation and initiative
  - Brightness, energy, and ability to learn quickly
  - Understanding and knowledge of how to deal with people
  - Knowledge of how to communicate effectively
  - Team work and positive attitude
  - Good ideas
  - Dependability and ability to get things done
  - Effective negotiation
  - Ability to think on your feet

How Does Industry Differ From Academic Employment with a Ph. D.?

- Employees MUST make company more profitable
  - Work on problems which employer needs to have solved
  - Identify and propose solutions
- Reliance on individuals to provide input for overall technical and strategic direction
- You contribute to the development of a product that people will use
- Teamwork is survival
- Keeping deadlines and schedules is survival
- Contributions to products and patents are highly valued
- Publications are a plus, but not key
- Need to make decisions quickly, sometimes without complete information, based upon training, experience and intuition
- Need to compromise to meet business needs, especially short cycle times
- Greater emphasis on short and long term accountability
- Industry invests a great deal in training you and wants to protect that investment

What Factors Lead To Success and Failure In Industry?

Success

- Be Visible!
  - Show concrete results (e.g., designs, prototypes)
  - Print crisp summaries of recommendations
  - Display one clear graph to illustrate point
  - Specify product goals and directions
  - Work with customers
  - Shadow management
  - Describe accomplishments
  - Make decisions based upon current facts
- Help clients any way you can!
  - Utilize skills, knowledge, and ability creatively
  - Be a leader, show initiative
  - Show you care, learn about product
- Prioritize
  - Be accomplishments/goal oriented
  - Maximize benefits for effort
  - Do work that will impact business
  - Be timely

Failure

- The Ivory Tower Problem
  - Telling it with long letters and notes
  - Writing long "research reports"
  - Hiding behind charts and graphs
  - Going along without clear goals and direction
  - Doing comprehensive studies that take too long
  - Spending lots of time in classes
  - Describing activities
  - Saying "I need to do more research"
- Saying "It is not my job so I don't do it"
  - Doing it only if it was covered in a textbook
  - Following a checklist
  - Relying on others for product expertise
- Trying to do it all
  - Being activity oriented
  - Feeling you can or even should do it all
  - Doing studies for the sake of doing them
  - Missing deadlines

This table originally developed by RG Shapiro, AM Vosburgh, PD Pagerey, and R Rao for "How Human Factors Can Maximize Its Effect In Organizations" a special presentation to the Hudson Valley Chapter of the Human Factors Society, September 22, 1993.

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Practical Recommendations For Securing A Job

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Education
Grades K to 12

Education: Grades K- 12 Application Criteria

- Follow advertisement instructions explicitly:
  - Recommendations:
    - If recommendations are requested, be sure they are submitted as requested
    - Be sure recommender knows you and your work
    - "Recommendations furnished upon request" may lower your chances of getting an interview
  - Cover all requirements using specified format
  - Don't miss a deadline... even by a second

Education: Grades K- 12 Application Criteria (continued)

- Include (but be brief and concise):
  - Statement of philosophy
  - Academic credentials
  - Show that you know your perspective employer
- Send application to the address specified
- Recheck, is the application complete?
- Confirm receipt of application by mail 7 working days after application deadline

Tip: Keep your application alive.

Follow up one week after each contact with a Thank You note

Education: Grades K- 12
The Interview

- Prepare portfolio in advance:
  - Comprehensive
  - Organized into meaningful sections and tabbed
  - Nicely arranged
  - Include a comprehensive Table of Contents
- Committee including approximately 6 people comprised of:
  - Administration (sometimes)
  - Faculty
  - Parent
- Duration approximately 30 minutes
- On some interviews you may be asked to demonstrate your teaching skills
  - Ask about this when interview is scheduled

Education: Grades K- 12

The Interview (continued)

- Use your portfolio to illustrate accomplishments
- Convey your liking for kids
- Provide evidence that you are a team player
- Criteria:
  - Solid educational background
  - Experience
  - Communications skills
  - Interpersonal skills
  - Job knowledge and skills
  - Sense of teaching and learning process
- Note: Some jobs require multiple interviews on the same day and some require interviews on multiple days, eliminating candidates on each successive interview

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Education: Grades K- 12
Securing a Position

- A final thought:
  - After all is said, if you can't relate to kids, if you can't make every kid special to you, then you are in the wrong profession.

    Ron Tibbetts, Ed. D.
    Principal
    Henry Barnard Laboratory School
    Rhode Island College

  - Show you are in the right profession in your application, during your interview, and on the job!!!!

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A Career In Industry

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How Do You Make Contact With Industry?

- Know the business you are contacting
  - Web Pages:
    - Know what the company tells the world about itself
    - Know what the world says about the company
  - Annual reports: Know what the company tells its shareholders
  - Trade press: Know what is said about the company in public
  - Professional publications: Know what people are doing
  - Products: Be familiar with the products produced
- Establish contact with technical people/managers early in graduate career if possible
  - Seek contacts of professionals in your field
    - By reading and contributing to LISTSERVs
    - At professional talks/meetings
    - From published technical papers and the popular press
    - From directories of professional societies
  - Initiate and maintain contact with e-mail, phone calls, letters, visits

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How Do You Make Contact With Industry? (Continued)

- Do short assignments in industry (e.g., co-ops, work study, contracts) if possible
- Be active in professional organizations:
  - Human Factors and Ergonomics Society (HFES) and local chapters
  - Association for Computing Machinery (ACM)
    - Special Interest Group on Computer-Human Interaction (SIGCHI)
  - Usability Professionals' Association (UPA)
  - American Psychological Association (APA)
  - Society of Industrial and Organizational Psychology (SIOP)
  - Regional or state psychological associations
  - Other technical or application area or business societies
- Be active as a valued contributor to LISTSERVs
- Take advantage of campus visits by industry professionals
- Tour industrial sites whenever possible

What Makes a Good Resume?

- The purpose of a resume is to show a prospective employer how they will benefit by having you on board
- Essential sections:
  - Objectives that are very focused
  - Education
  - Skills (Expert category and Familiar (but not expert) category)
  - Experience section that supports Objectives and shows:
    - Responsibilities
    - Results/accomplishments
  - Awards/Honors/Leadership/Affiliations (as appropriate)
  - Publications/Presentations

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What Makes a Good Resume? (Continued)

- Tips:
  - Your resume is your sales pitch
  - Customize your resume for each employer
  - Demonstrate that you understand the reader/employer
  - You may have only seconds to interest reader so resume must:
    - Be concise
    - Look attractive
    - Maintain the reader's attention
  - If sending by e-mail or mail, think of resume as an attachment to a letter which convinces employer they need you!
  - Maximize the desired behavioral outcome-- reader will call you!

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What Is An Interview Like?

- Discussions with management
  - Ask about
    - Initial Assignment
    - Growth path
    - Structure of the company
  - Expect to be asked
    - How do you think you would fit into the company?
    - What did you learn from technical discussions?
- Numerous discussions with future coworkers
  - Ask
    - What do you do?
    - What is a typical work week like?
  - Expect to be asked
    - How would you approach the work?
    - What would you like and dislike about the work?
    - How will you/your skills help me to do my job and get ahead?

What is an Interview Like? (Continued)

- Formal or Informal Presentation of major piece of work is possible
  - Preparation
    - Stress practical implications of work
    - Show relevance to industry problems if possible
    - Present summary of data, have details if asked
    - Stay within the time allocated for talk and discussion (be prepared to leave something out at the end if you get lots of questions)
  - At the presentation
    - Audience consists of lots of intelligent people
    - Audience probably does not know your field of study
    - You must convey importance of work, findings, and general sense of excitement to this audience
    - Attitude and ability to answer questions is very important
    - If you don't know the answer to a question, say so and volunteer to follow up if appropriate

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What is an Interview Like? (Continued)

- Discussions with human resources or management
  - Logistics of interview, company policy, application, etc.
  - If you interviewed for more than one department expect to be asked to rank order your preference for jobs
  - Ask about
    - Relocation package
    - Company benefits: retirement, medical, vacation
- All interviewer's goals are to determine how you will:
  - Fit on the team
  - Communicate
  - Enhance their reputation
  - Complement the team's skills
  - Make their job easier

NOTE: Interviews often include extensive discussion during meals. Be prepared.

What is an Interview Like? (Continued)

- Tips
  - Be open and honest
  - Don't be afraid to ask questions
  - Relax, but realize that all time spent with company personnel is part of the interview -- even in casual settings
- Remember
  - Employer knows you are good, or they would not have invited you for interview
  - Employer needs to see if your skills and interests match their needs
  - The most important part of the interview is for YOU to decide if the job is right for YOU!
    - Do you like the work?
    - Do you like the organization?
    - Do you like the people?
    - Are salary, benefits, and security appropriate for you?

How Does An Industrial Interview Differ From An Academic One?

- In industry:
  - More likely to meet with people from different disciplines
  - More focus on ways you can apply your background to new situations
  - More focus on the breadth of your background
  - More likely to be asked how you would solve specific business problems

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Summary

- There are GREAT opportunities with a Psychology Degree if you:
  - Learn how to use the tools psychology has to offer
  - Plan well
- Psychology degree provides 1/3 to 2/3 the background you will need
  - Maximize the value of your psychology education
  - Study business, science, and technology for the other 1/3 to 2/3
- Do an internship or two to learn
  - About the field you want to work in
  - The tools used in that field
- A dual major of psychology and technology or business may be an unbeatable combination!
- For Doctor of Philosophy (Ph. D.):
  - A career in industry can be just as technically challenging and rewarding as a university job
  - Primary differences between industry and academics include
    - In academic psychology you investigate how people work
    - In industry you build systems that take advantage of this knowledge
- Don't assume!

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